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Commentary Series

7:55 a.m. and 5:55 p.m. Weekdays on VPR

Frederick Billings' Great Thoughts on forest management

Thursday, 10/23/03 12am

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By [Tom Slayton](#), Montpelier, VT

(Host) Commentator Tom Slayton joins us today with the story of a Vermonter whose Great Thought may have changed the State's landscape.

(Slayton) The forests and fields on the side of Mount Tom are filled with intense color: beech, and maple leaves glow bright yellow in the morning sun, and dark shadows flit through the woods. It would be only natural to think that Mother Nature herself created this beautiful forest. But that's only half the truth; the other half is man. A man - specifically, Frederick S. Billings, a Vermonter who made his fortune out west and returned to Vermont to help design this very landscape.

I am walking through the forested lands of Vermont's only national park, the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, with two companions: Christina Marts, the park's Director of Resources, and Ben Machin a forester who works for a private consulting firm. They are both part of the ongoing story of this place in Woodstock and part of a couple of important Vermont ideas - that forests can be healthy, beautiful, and productive, all at the same time; and that the natural world and the human world are inextricably inter-related; that their health, in fact depends upon one another.

Those ideas began right here, on this land. George Perkins Marsh, who later became a U.S. Congressman and diplomat, grew up here and saw the ravages of deforestation as the bare hills eroded and the streams choked with mud after every rainstorm. Frederick Billings, deeply influenced by Marsh's writings, bought the property in 1869, saw the same devastation, and began a program of reforestation.

The forests that Billings planted, and others that grew up naturally here, under his wise care, are hemlock, beech, spruce and maple. But they are also an idea made real, an idea literally given roots. This forest, one of the first managed forests in America, is a managed forest today with several functions - recreation, education, timber production and more.

A little further on Machin and Marks notice a newly-fallen butternut tree, and make plans to salvage its wood. "There's about 2,000 bowls in that tree," Machin says. Earlier we had stopped at a site where some 100-year-old pines were being milled into fresh-smelling planks and beams. That wood, and this butternut, most likely, will be used for local projects around the park and by local craftsmen to make bowls and furniture and other craft items.

Again, these are Billings' ideas at work. Forests are beautiful, true; but in Billings' mind, they could also be useful. He was an advocate of using products from local forests to revitalize the local economy. Thus, he not only brought the art and science of forest management to the United States, he helped found that quintessentially Vermonty idea -- that the environment IS the economy.

Thanks in good part to Frederick Billings, that idea is a living reality today, in the managed forests of the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Park, and in other managed forests throughout Vermont and the United States.

This is Tom Slayton in Montpelier.

Tom Sayton is editor of Vermont Life magazine.

More from **Commentary Series**



Henningsen: An Honorable Man

Tuesday, 07/19/11 7:55am

Few of us know anything about Richard H. Poff, a former Virginia congressman and state supreme court justice, but historian and commentator Vic Henningsen thinks that more of us should.

Hanna: The Social Animal

Monday, 07/18/11 5:55pm

If you're looking for some summer reading that might change how you see yourself and your world, commentator and Vermont Law School professor Cheryl Hanna has a recommendation that might be of particular interest.



Guyon: Splendent Earth

Monday, 07/18/11 7:55am

Summer is a good time to visit your local museum or gallery, so commentator and art writer Annie Guyon is here with another of her occasional dispatches on Vermont's visual arts.

More from **Tom Slayton**



Slayton: Villages and Downtowns

Wednesday, 07/06/11 5:55pm -

The recent merger of two environmental organizations got commentator Tom Slayton thinking - about the importance of small towns and villages in today 's Vermont.



Slayton: Irasburg Affair Remembered

Monday, 05/02/11 7:55am -

As Vermonters read To Kill A Mockingbird, commentator Tom Slayton, reflects on one event in the 1960s that put Vermont's racial tensions in the national spotlight.



Slayton: Winter Pleasures

Wednesday, 03/09/11 7:55am -

Commentator Tom Slayton doesn't mind all the ice and snow we've had this winter. In fact, he thinks this is the way winter should be.